10-9-2003

I Just Want To Bomb. Broad Street Studio reinvents the Providence b-boy

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I JUST WANT TO BOMB

Broad Street Studio reinvents the Providence b-boy

by Josh Bauchner / photo by Jess Tierney

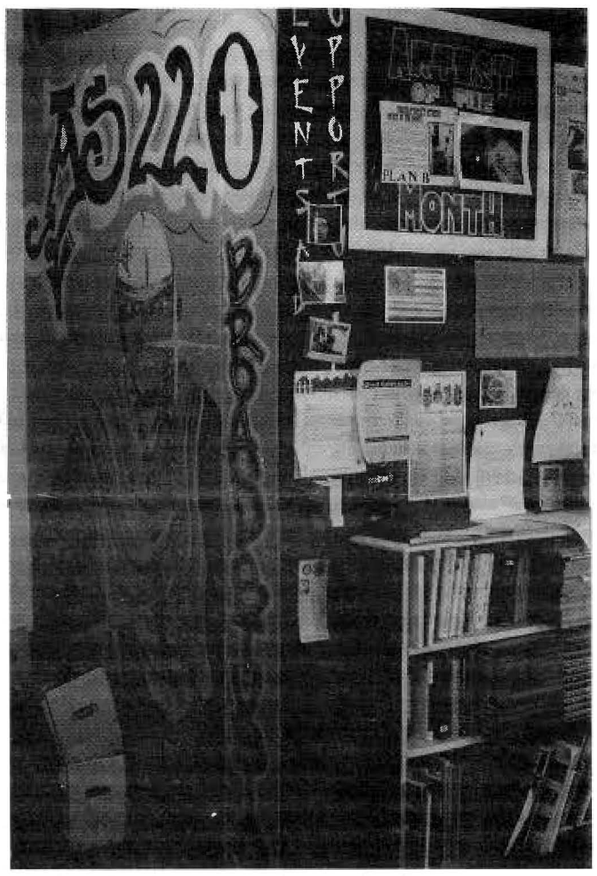
In this year of Ben and J. Lo, P. Diddy and the Bad Boys, and a remix to ignition poppin' fresh out the kitchen, a.k.a. the big 03, hip hop unofficially turns 25. As fluid as any art form or cultural movement, hip hop has always allowed kids to create their own experience. Back when hip hop was starting off, any kid could grab a spray can and create his or her own Sistine Chapel—the possibilities for the movement were huge, and it was the youth that fostered this growth; they defined their own experience through MCing, DJing, writing graffiti, and breaking.

This tradition of finding a creative outlet through hip hop continues today at Broad Street Studio, a youth-based community and arts center in South Providence. Kids are encouraged to participate actively in all of the arts offered at the center, and not just passively listen to and imitate currently successful hip hop, be it mainstream or underground. As MTV and El-P present images that fail to reflect the reality of life in South Providence, so too grows the apparent disparity between Buddy Cianci's promise of a grand arts renaissance and the arts budget cuts that continue to roll out of City Hall. Broad Street Studio is responding to this uncertainty by shaping a new reality of what hip hop, and by extension, Providence should be.

AS220, BROAD STREET STUDIO, AND THE SYNTHESIS OF ART AND COMMUNITY

Four years ago, Laura Adams was running a weekly writing workshop called the Muse Union at the Rhode Island Training School (RITS), the juvenile prison in Cranston. The program attempted to teach the kids at RITS how to communicate through poetry, narrative, fiction and spoken word. Though many of the kids had never written such personal pieces before, the Muse Union became an important creative outlet for the kids at the training school.

The only problem was that as soon as the kids left RITS, they were semi-abandoned by the system, and many quickly returned to the school. Bert Crenca, the entrepreneur and patron extraordinaire of AS220, a downtown art gallery and performance space, hired Adams to expand the workshops outside of the training school. With a $40,000 grant from the Lisa Wallace Reader's Digest fund, the Muse Union soon combined with HipHop220, AS220's hip hop branch, to form Broad Street Studio. They moved into a 3,000 square foot space on Providence's South Side, and with the help of Americorps Vista volunteers, began to teach life skills and communication to youth through the arts—especially those forms that fall under the wide banner of hip hop.



At the same time that Laura Adams was running the Muse Union at the training school, Kareem Caines and DJ Tek were running HipHop220. When Caines arrived in Providence and saw AS220's otherwise diverse artistic offerings, he noticed that hip hop was not represented. He approached Crenca with the idea of starting a monthly hip hop show at AS220. HipHop220 started as "Respirations on a Providence Plantation" and "W.A.R.," both monthly hip hop and spoken word shows at AS220's downtown complex. When HipHop220 combined with the Muse Union to create Broad Street Studio, its focus shifted from representing Providence hip hop through music and verse to using hip hop as a way to reach Providence kids.

Many kids from the Training School and group homes come to work or intern with BSS. They not only learn about freestyling and graffiti art, but also about running one of BSS' six businesses that range from hip hop show promotions (Hiphop220) to a printing press (Broad Street Press), to a mural painting business (Visuals). Each is run on a business plan drafted by the kids—they manage, plan, market, and produce everything.

MTV, DEF JUX, AND BROAD STREET STUDIO

Today's consumer of hip hop is faced with a choice: on one side of the spectrum, there's MTV. Videos featuring women on leashes, Jacob the Jeweler's finest work, and bottles of Cristal rule the programming from TRL to Direct Effect. On the other side, there's Definitive Jux, El-P's stable of indie MCs and DJs dropping rhymes about patriotism, saving hip hop, and Noam Chomsky.

As an alternative to the fantasy propelled by Carson and LaLa and the paranoia spewed by Aesop and Lif, Broad Street Studio offers a third option. This take on hip hop promoted by director David Gonzalez and HipHop220 head Plan B gives Providence youths a chance to create their own urban experience, one of spoken word, Afro-Caribbean beats, and business plans. In today's MC-centric world, it is easy to forget that hip hop is actually a far broader cultural movement than just rap music. Broad-Street's diverse modes of cultural production harkens back to the original days when b-boys and writers got just as much respect as any MC.

The videos that are in heavy play on MTV and BET go on to become the soundtracks to 7-Up commercials along with practically being advertisements for the alcohol the MC drinks (Courvoisier), the cars they drive (Hummers) and the women they surround themselves with (scantily clad). These interests do little but further the extreme wealth already in the control of the MCs and DJs that espouse their products. While corporate logos are visible at BSS in the form of commissions and grants, BSS has little in common with the sanitized mainstream hip hop favored by Pepsi Co. ad executives.

This might seem contradictory since the newest mural that Broad Street Visuals is working on was commissioned by the insurance giant MetLife. But it's through commissions like these that Visuals is able to continue teaching graffiti and acrylics. As a way of thanking MetLife for their contribution project and to secure further investment, Broad Street kids painted an additional mural to give to the company. BSS used the mural as a teaching opportunity; it was painted and repainted by the kids of Broad Street until finally, when they ran out of paint and caps it is completed with large letters: "Thank You MetLife." The painting, inspired by Jackson Pollack, may carry a corporate message, and that message is always subservient to the pedagogical goals of Broad Street.

While MetLife got a painting it can use to symbolize its corporate benevolence in a promotional pamphlet, 30 kids from Providence got an opportunity to hone their graffiti skills, courtesy of Big Insurance. It costs money to make art, but Broad Street remains honest about the contributions that allow the program to run.

El-P and Definitive Jux market themselves as a defiant alternative to MTV by promoting a return to artistic integrity with intelligent lyrics, sparse and futuristic beats, and intricate and sometimes unintelligible flow. In creating fostering this new supposed integrity, though, Definitive Jux has spawned its own empire, imposing a New York-centric conception of hip hop onto listeners frustrated with the mainstream.

El-P plays the role of an underground P. Diddy, the producer who is now the CEO of his company and flows on almost all of his protégés projects. He is as ubiquitous in the just-below-the-mainstream underground that houses MTV2, college radio, and *Vice* magazine as the P man is on MTV. But at the end of the day, El-P has the luxury to create a product with so-called artistic integrity—he knows that he will sell a certain number of records and that he will sell out most venues on his never-ending search for a new sound.

The MCs at Broad Street Studio are also chasing that new sound, but one that foregoes the righteous pretense so prevalent in El-P's New York boutique hip hop. Broad Street's integrity arises not from its conscious, over-intellectualized challenge to P. Diddy or a vow to stay out of the mainstream, but rather from its honest reflection of both a love for hip hop and the harsh realities of producing a hip hop record without a budget. "We're really not looking for the next 50 Cent," explains HipHop220 producer Plan B. "We're trying to bring out something new; we're looking for something more." When HipHop220 puts out its debut LP in November, it will sell if it sounds different. The aim is not to remain underground, though; rather, it is to attract attention from labels and eventually become self sufficient, which is the ultimate goal of BSS.

For Providence to make a name for itself in the hip hop world, one artist must break into the mainstream and pave the road for other rappers and hip hop performers. At least in the sense of reaffirming Providence as an urban cultural center, what is good for hip hop is good for the city. But putting Providence on the hip hop map is only the most indirect and long term way Broad Street helps the community, as Gonzalez explains: "We like what we do, and we know how important it is for our goals to happen out here with youth being introduced to art, but other than that, it's not it. It's more based on personal relationships."

PROVIDENCE, HIP HOP, AND AN ARTS REFORMATION

The pride of a city can emanate from many different sources: sports teams, food, architecture, great museums. Over the past decade, Providence has prided itself on the arts. Buddy Cianci's City Hall force-fed WaterFire, the Trinity Rep, and the whole Providence-as-Renaissance City idea down our collective throats until people truly praised the city for its opportunities. Art galleries, free music shows, theater events, and a diverse group of artists spread throughout the city put a shiny veneer over all of Providence. Just as under Buddy' amiable façade laid a corrupt and ruthless boss of the old political machines, a crumbling infrastructure for Providence public schools and services was hidden beneath Providence's parade of arts. Mayor David Cicilline's administration is the clean up crew for Cianci's big party, a task that requires cutting arts funding. In response to the cuts, Broad Street Studio has had to reform much of their operations, and in so doing, reshape what hip hop means to Providence kids.

The current budget of $300,000 a year for BSS is almost entirely dependent on grants from the Rhode Island Foundation and the Department of Children, Youth and Families. As state and municipal budgets are slashed, BSS must adapt and form new relationships with sponsors (such as Met Life) in order to continue operating. But BSS has taken this challenge and turned it into a new forum for learning. BSS is teaching the kids not to grow up to become ballers, or any type of figure promoted by MTV and Bad Boy, nor to become independent MCs bent on saving hip hop; rather, BSS promotes business life skills, such

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as management and communication, through the arts and hip hop. Hopefully, one day its investment will pay off for Providence.

Even though hip hop may currently have no visible balance between mainstream and underground, Broad Street offers a third perspective rooted in activism. Whether or not Broad Street has succeeded in this endeavor is difficult to assess; it has no formal mechanism to keep track of kids who have graduated from the program. But Broad Street has made it clear that hip hop doesn't have to be about nihilistic greed or about a polarized struggle between the 'real' and the 'commercial.' Instead, hip hop can be linked with social change and education. What started as a way for kids to create their own culture 25 years ago, through graffiti writing, MCing, DJing, and breaking, has found expression again, through Broad Street Studios, here in Providence.

JOSH BAUCHNER B '07 has nothing wrong with his leg, he's just b-boy limpin'